

MINUTES
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
1420 East 6th Avenue – Helena Headquarters
Helena, MT 59620

Commission Conference Call Meeting
October 13, 2009

Commission Members Present: Shane Colton, Chairman; Dan Vermillion, Vice-Chairman; Ron Moody, Bob Ream, Willie Doll

Media Present: Eve Byron, Independent Record

Fish, Wildlife & Parks Staff Present: Director Maurier, Ken McDonald, Quentin Kujala, Art Noonan, Bob Lane, Caroline Sime, Dave Risley, Ron Aasheim, Gary Hammond, Bob Gibson, Regena Peterson

Topics of Discussion:

- 1. Opening – Call to Order**
- 2. Wolf Management Unit 3**

1. Call to Order. Chairman Colton called the conference call meeting to order at 3:00 p.m.

2. Wolf Management Unit 3. Dave Risley, Fish & Wildlife Administrator, stated that two wolves have been taken in WMU1, and as of last week, nine of the quota of twelve have been taken in WM3. The wolves in WMU3 have been harvested along the northern border of Yellowstone National Park during the back country season, and due to the concern that the quota would be filled by the general season opening day, the Commission had asked the Wildlife Division to develop potential options and recommendations for discussion at today's conference call, including the possibility of reallocating quotas.

The options are as follows:

Management Options (in no particular order); adjustments expected in biennial season proposal for 2010/2011 and/or during the quota-setting process for 2010.

1. Keep WMU 3 wolf season closed.

a. PRO

- i. No potential for WMU 3 quota over-run
- ii. No additional Commission action required

b. CON

- i. No understanding of opening day/general season in WMU 3
- ii. Local hunters must travel to WMUs 1 and 2 to hunt wolves
- iii. Intentionally undershoot conservative quota by three wolves; some opportunity foregone within front country

2. **Open WMU 3 wolf season on Sunday, October 25, 2009 except in HD 316, close upon harvest of three wolves.**

- a. PRO
 - i. Gain understanding of opening day/general season in WMU 3
 - ii. Local hunters have opportunity to hunt wolves locally for at least two days
 - iii. Likely to fill prescribed quota at least
 - iv. Consistent with other quota management
 - v. No additional Commission action required
- b. CON
 - i. High potential for WMU 3 quota over-run; number uncertain
 - ii. 24 hour closure notice allows potential for over-run harvest after quota has been met
 - iii. Inconsistent with other quota management (staff sense that quota may close quickly typically prompts early closure)
 - iv. Early closures in other WMUs in spite of approved final quotas and public expectations currently surrounding them; level of “foregone” opportunity uncertain
 - v. If it occurs, an over-run would influence other WMU closures through an early closure to remain within total of 75 to detriment of prescription and expectations in one or both of the other two WMUs, quota management most consistent with original quota proposal (relative to connectivity and other factors described in the tentative and final quota docs) would influence WMU 2 closure, WMU 2 quota set at intermediate number of 22, relatively large over-run in WMU 3 may need to also influence WMU 1 closure by early closure there (i.e., in addition to early closure in WMU 2 or instead of early closure in WMU 2) – domino effect.

3. **Open WMU 3 wolf season on Sunday, October 25, 2009, except in HD 316; close at end of same day.**

- a. PRO
 - i. Gain understanding of full opening day in WMU 3
 - ii. Local hunters have opportunity to hunt wolves locally for opening day
 - iii. Real potential to fill prescribed quota at least
 - iv. Reduced potential for over-run harvest during 24 hour closure notice period decreased from #1 above
 - v. Consistent with other quota management (staff sense that quota may close quickly typically prompts early closure)
 - vi. No additional Commission action required
- b. CON
 - i. Lower potential (than #2 above) for WMU 3 quota over-run; number uncertain
 - ii. Early closures in other WMUs in spite of approved final quotas and public expectations currently surrounding them; level of “foregone” opportunity uncertain
 - iii. Over-run would influence other WMU closures to detriment of prescription and expectations in those areas, quota management most consistent with original quota proposal (relative to connectivity) would influence WUM 2 closure, WMU 2 quota set at relatively small number of 22, relatively large over-run may need to also influence WMU 1 closure.

4. **Adjust current WMU quotas. Either by considering the other two options identified by the modeling exercise or re-adjust the individual WMU quotas using other criteria yet to be identified**

- a. PRO
 - i. Gain understanding of opening day/general season in WMU 3
 - ii. Local hunters have opportunity to hunt wolves locally
- b. CON
 - i. Does not eliminate potential for quota over-run that could further influence or include other WMUs; potential dependent on how WMU quotas were reallocated; number uncertain

- ii. Early closures in other WMUs in spite of approved final quotas and public expectations currently surrounding them; level of “foregone” opportunity uncertain Inconsistent with other quota management
- iii. Additional Commission action required essentially re-doing annual quota setting after significant public and legal communication based upon current statewide and WMU quotas; completed by 10-25?

5. Immediately re-open WMU 3 backcountry wolf season

a. PRO

- i. Continue opportunity in backcountry
- ii. Real potential to fill prescribed quota at least; quota overrun less likely than other alternatives
- iii. Consistent with other quota management
- iv. No additional Commission action required

b. CON

- i. May gain no understanding of opening day/general season in WMU 3 if quota is met prior to October 25, 2009 this year
- ii. Potential to increase harvest in the wilderness area; though biologically sustainable, raises other concerns
- iii. Public expectations of front country hunt may not be met

FWP recommends Option 2.

Action: Moody moved and Vermillion seconded the motion to endorse Option 2, which is to Open WMU 3 wolf season on Sunday, October 25, 2009 except in HD 316, and close WMU3 upon harvest of three wolves.

Colton stated that the Commission had set an overall conservative quota to gain knowledge and understanding of hunter harvest of wolves and the affects of hunting on the wolf population. This is not new action, but an effort to be responsive and to learn more about the management of wolves.

Doll inquired about transferring quotas from other WMUs as had been discussed at the previous meeting.

Colton replied that it is one of the options, however adjusting quota numbers would essentially mean redoing the annual quota setting process, and would not eliminate the potential to over-run quotas in any or all WMUs. With the conservative total quota of 75, there is leeway to over-run in WMU 3, and look at early closures in other areas.

Risley noted that the backcountry wolves are more susceptible for some reason. If the quota system is left to run its course, it will be a valuable learning experience. Wolf behavior will not be changed in one season, but the Department will get an idea of hunter behavior.

Ream said the quota is especially conservative in WMU3, as the Commission was sensitive to connectivity in Unit 3. The nine wolves taken were taken north of Yellowstone Park instead of where most connectivity occurs. Option 2 would allow continuation of a season even though nine have already been taken. If the Department had known that nine would be taken from backcountry areas, things might have been done differently.

Moody stated that there were two reasons for consideration of reallocation of quotas from WMUs 1 and 2 to WMU3. One was to ensure opportunity to those who bought wolf permits, and the other was to gain an understanding of the behavior of wolves. He does not believe moving quotas between WMUs to provide opportunity is an adequate reason. Many people worldwide are observing, and public trust must be earned. He has eliminated reallocation to WMU3 for additional opportunities as an option he would support.

Doll stated that the depredation issues on ranches in the Gallatin and Madison Valleys needs to be considered as well as hunter opportunity issues. Taking all wolves from the backcountry does not help the ranchers.

Vermillion said he understands the impact on domestic livestock, and noted that the Wildlife Service is assisting in those issues. He supports taking a conservative approach and minimizing the impact on quota overrun while still providing public opportunity.

Colton stated that he takes issue that the public feels the Commission erred, when in fact conservative quotas had actually been set. It was difficult to predict a harvest, and the wolf is being managed similarly to other species the Department manages. This is not a change to the season, but a slight adjustment to wolf management. This does not require public comment – a great deal was received when the season was set. The Commission is using authority already given. Wildlife Services is handling depredation issues.

Ream urged those on both extremes of the issue to calm down. The November Commission meeting is two weeks after the season starts, so adjustments might be done at that time.

Action on Motion: Motion carried.

Action: Vermillion moved and Moody seconded the motion to adjourn the conference call meeting. Motion carried.

Meeting adjourned at 3:36 p.m.

Shane Colton, Chairman

Joe Maurier, Director